



**ESSAYS
ON
CRITICAL
AND
PROGRESSIVE
ISLAM**

Adis Duderija (Ph.D)

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Table Of Contents

1. Brief Biography
2. In Lieu of Introduction-What I Believe In: Embracing Rationalism, Feminism, Critical Thought, Sufism, and Process-Relational Theology
3. Progressive Islam as Critical Islam/Critical Islamic Traditionalism
4. Critical-Progressive Islam: An Outline
5. How Critical-Progressive Islam Can Help Overcome Islamic Sectarianism
6. What it Means to Be a Critical-Progressive Islamist
7. How Adoption of Critical Traditionalism/Progressive Islam by Muslim Scholars and Preachers Can Counteract Islamophobia
8. Critical-Progressive Muslim Thought as Contemporary Iteration of Sufi-like Ethico-Moral Philosophy
9. Critical-Progressive Islam: Key Ideas to Help the Muslim Majority World Achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals
10. Embracing Islam as a Dynamic Civilizational Project: The Critical-Progressive Muslim Worldview
11. Traditional and Critical-Progressive Qur'an-Sunna Interpretational Models from Comparative Perspective
12. The Qur'an and the Nature of Revelation in Critical Progressive Islam
13. How Critical Progressive Islam Approaches the Idea of Sunna

Brief Biography



Adis Duderija is a first-generation Bosnian-Australian. He obtained his Ph. D in 2010 at the Centre for Muslim States and Societies at the University of western Australia on interpretational methodologies of Qur'an and Sunna in Neo-Traditional Salafism and Progressive Islam. He is currently an academic at Griffith University in Brisbane Australia where he teaches courses on Islam and Gender, Islamic intellectual tradition and Islam and Muslims in the West. He is the author of 9 books on various aspects of Islamic intellectual tradition (progressive Islam, Qur'anic hermeneutics, the concept of sunna, maqasid al shari'a, Salafism) and Islam and Muslims in the West and over 100 academic publications on these subjects.

For more details :

<https://experts.griffith.edu.au/7439-adis-duderija>

<https://scholar.google.com.my/>

[citations?user=RLEaZukAAAAJ&hl=en](https://scholar.google.com.my/citations?user=RLEaZukAAAAJ&hl=en)

In Lieu of Introduction-What I Believe In: Embracing Rationalism, Feminism, Sufism, Critical Thought, Cosmopolitanism and Process-Relational Theology

Adis Duderija

In a world characterised by diverse philosophical and theological perspectives, I find myself embracing a unique blend of rationalism, feminism, Sufism, critical thought, cosmopolitanism and process-relational theology. While these may seem like disparate strands of thought, they intertwine harmoniously in my worldview, shaping my understanding of the self, society, and spirituality. In this short piece I will share my personal journey and shed light on the ways in which these philosophical and theological frameworks have enriched my life and perspectives.

Rationalism: Nurturing the Power of Reason

As a rationalist, I place great emphasis on the power of reason and critical thinking. Rationalism encourages us to question assumptions, challenge dogmas, and seek evidence-based knowledge. It empowers me to navigate the complexities of life with an open and skeptical mind, always striving for intellectual honesty and coherence. Rationalism

provides a solid foundation for my philosophical and theological inquiries, enabling me to engage with ideas and beliefs in a thoughtful and analytical manner. Importantly, it rejects [fideistic](#) and heavily textualist approaches to theology based on [classical theism](#).

Feminism: Advocating for Equality and Justice

My commitment to feminism stems from a deep-seated belief in the inherent equality and dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender. Feminism challenges oppressive structures, stereotypes, and gender norms, advocating for equal opportunities and rights for all. It inspires me to actively work towards dismantling patriarchal systems and fostering inclusivity and justice in all spheres of life. Feminism informs my understanding of social dynamics, highlighting the importance of intersectionality and amplifying marginalized voices.

Sufism: Seeking Spiritual Wisdom and Unity

Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, plays a significant role in shaping my spiritual journey. It emphasizes the inward search for divine knowledge and the cultivation of a personal relationship with the Divine. Sufism's teachings of love, compassion, and spiritual unity resonate deeply with me. It encourages me to embrace the beauty of diversity and seek harmony between the material and the spiritual realms. Sufism's emphasis on introspection, mindfulness, and the pursuit of inner peace provides a valuable compass for navigating life's challenges.

Adherence to Critical Thought

As an individual, my personal philosophy also revolves around critical thought. I firmly believe in the power of independent thinking, questioning established ideas, and evaluating beliefs across various domains, including religion, politics, modernity, and philosophy. I strive to approach these areas with a mindset of rigorous inquiry and

a commitment to arriving at well-informed and reasoned conclusions.

In the realm of religion, critical thought is vital to me. I find great value in engaging with religious doctrines, texts, and teachings critically. It allows me to delve into the depths of belief systems, questioning and analysing their meaning and relevance. I believe in intellectual freedom and autonomy when it comes to exploring different religious perspectives, challenging dogmas, and interpreting religious teachings in light of my own experiences and insights.

When it comes to politics, critical thought is at the core of my approach. I am deeply committed to critically analysing political ideologies, systems, and policies. I believe in questioning the motives and consequences of political decisions, scrutinizing power structures, and challenging dominant narratives and discourses. Engaging in critical thought in politics enables me to be an informed and responsible citizen, engaging in constructive dialogue, advocating for social justice, and contributing to the betterment of society.

In the context of modernity, critical thought plays a significant role in shaping my worldview. I constantly examine the social, cultural, and technological transformations associated with modern times. I believe in critically assessing the impact of modernity on various aspects of life, such as individual autonomy, social relationships, and the environment. By questioning the assumptions and values underlying modernization processes, I strive to navigate the complexities of modernity while recognizing and harnessing its potential benefits and opportunities.

In the realm of philosophy, critical thought is essential to me. I engage in a rigorous examination of philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments. I enjoy questioning foundational assumptions, challenging philosophical frameworks, and engaging in logical reasoning and analysis. Critical thought in philosophy cultivates intellectual humility, curiosity, and an appreciation for the complexity and diversity of philosophical perspectives.

Overall, critical thought is a central pillar of my personal philosophy. It empowers me to exercise intellectual autonomy, embrace open-mindedness, and commit to evidence-based reasoning. I am dedicated to continuous learning, self-reflection, and engaging in respectful dialogue with others. By fostering a deeper understanding of complex issues through critical thought, I strive for personal growth, social progress, and the pursuit of truth.

Process-Relational Theology: Embracing Dynamic and Interconnected Existence

Process-relational theology offers a framework that complements and enriches my philosophical and theological perspectives. It views reality as a dynamic and interdependent web of relationships. Instead of static entities, it understands the world in terms of evolving processes and interactions. Process-relational theology invites us to perceive God as an immanent and evolving presence, intimately engaged with the world. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the co-creative nature of existence, inspiring a sense of responsibility and care for the well-being of all.

Embracing a Cosmopolitan Identity: Fostering Global Awareness and Interconnectedness

In addition to the philosophical and theological frameworks of rationalism, feminism, Sufism, and process-relational theology, I also embrace a cosmopolitan identity that emphasises global awareness and interconnectedness. This cosmopolitan perspective acknowledges the diversity of human experiences and recognizes the value of cultural exchange and dialogue.

By embracing a cosmopolitan identity, I strive to transcend narrow boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and religion. I recognize that our shared humanity unites us and that we have a collective responsibility

to promote understanding, tolerance, and cooperation among different cultures and communities. This perspective encourages me to engage with diverse perspectives and learn from the wisdom and experiences of others.

A cosmopolitan worldview also prompts me to confront issues of social justice and inequality on a global scale. It compels me to address systemic injustices that perpetuate poverty, discrimination, and marginalization in different parts of the world. I actively seek to contribute to initiatives and movements that promote human rights, sustainable development, and peace across borders.

Moreover, a cosmopolitan identity fosters a sense of empathy and solidarity with individuals and communities facing adversity. It motivates me to advocate for refugees and migrants, recognizing their right to safety, dignity, and equal opportunities. I strive to challenge xenophobia and promote an inclusive society that values cultural diversity and recognizes the contributions of all individuals, regardless of their background.

In cultivating a cosmopolitan identity, I aim to bridge divides, break down stereotypes, and promote mutual respect and understanding. I recognize that our interconnectedness as a global community necessitates cooperation and collaboration to address the pressing challenges of our time, such as climate change, global health crises, and economic inequality.

Embracing a cosmopolitan identity complements the philosophical and theological frameworks I adhere to, as it reinforces the principles of justice, equality, and compassion that underlie these perspectives. It guides my actions and interactions, encouraging me to embrace the richness of our diverse world while working towards a more inclusive, just, and peaceful global society.

While each of these frameworks brings its own unique insights and

perspectives, I find that they synergize harmoniously in my worldview. Rationalism provides the tools to critically engage with ideas and beliefs, ensuring intellectual coherence. Feminism challenges me to dismantle oppressive structures and work towards a more just and inclusive society. Sufism offers spiritual guidance, fostering a deep sense of connection and unity with the Divine and all creation. Process-relational theology complements these perspectives by providing a framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness and dynamic nature of existence. Cosmopolitan identity helps me transcend my narrower identities associated with nationality, religion and ethnicity.

Embracing this multifaceted worldview has practical implications in my daily life. It informs the choices I make, the causes I support, and the relationships I cultivate. It encourages me to engage in meaningful dialogue and bridge gaps between diverse perspectives. It inspires me to seek justice and equality, championing the rights of the marginalized. It guides me towards nurturing empathy, compassion, and love in my interactions with others. This integrated worldview provides a sense of purpose and direction, enabling me to navigate the complexities of life with intentionality and authenticity.

My journey as a cosmopolitan, rationalist, critical philosophical, feminist, progressive Sufi and process-relational theologian has been a profound and enriching experience. This unique blend of perspectives has shaped my understanding of the self, society, and spirituality. Through rationalism, feminism, Sufism, and process-relational theology, I have found intellectual coherence, a commitment to justice and equality, spiritual solace, and a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness of existence. It is through the integration and synthesis of these diverse frameworks that I continue to explore and navigate life's profound questions, seeking to contribute to a more inclusive, compassionate, and harmonious world. I hope this worldview will become evident in the texts below.

Progressive Islam as Form of Critical Traditionalism/Critical Islam

Adis Duderija

This essay briefly discusses the idea of Progressive Islam as a form of critical traditionalism /critical Islam, as discussed by one of the leading scholars of contemporary Islam [Ebrahim Moosa](#). The designation “[critical traditionalist](#)” is how Ebrahim Moosa interprets the idea of “progressive Islam”. Critical traditionalism refers to an approach that calls for rigorous intellectual inquiry and evaluation of Islamic traditions and textual interpretations in light of contemporary socio-political realities and values. Prominent scholar Ebrahim Moosa has advocated critical traditionalism as a means to develop progressive understandings of Islam. This essay aims to explore progressive Islam as conceived through a lens of critical traditionalism, examining its key principles and implications.

At the core of critical traditionalism and progressive Islam lies a commitment to reconsidering Islamic teachings through thoughtful scrutiny and analysis of inherited understandings. Rather than adopting static or literal readings, this approach recognizes Islam as a continually evolving tradition shaped by diverse socio-historical contexts. It encourages believers to reflect critically upon long-held doctrines and

cultural norms, seeking interpretive flexibility that allows Islam to positively engage modern issues. Progress is thus achieved not through abandoning tradition but by rediscovering its spirit through renewed inquiry suited to changing times.

Critical traditionalism focuses this inquiry around certain core principles. Chief among them is upholding human dignity for all. Moosa argues this should form the ultimate yardstick by which all knowledge, including religious interpretations, is weighed. Understandings relegating groups to inferior statuses violate human dignity and require revision. Establishing dignity as Islam's lodestar necessitates revisiting teachings used to marginalize or oppress certain communities. It drives progressive understanding seeking to remedy historical injustices and promote social justice. By doing so, critical cum progressive Islam holds the potential to transform not only individual beliefs but also the broader social, cultural, and political landscape.

Another principle is valuing multiple methodological tools in interpretation. Rather than restricting valid analysis to strict traditional exegetical methods, critical traditionalism incorporates diverse disciplinary lenses. Historical-contextual analysis locates Qur'anic revelations and hadith within original societal milieus, unveiling narratives once deployed to establish patriarchal social orders. Feminist and post-colonial hermeneutics uncover androcentric biases and Orientalist influences distorting Islamic legal rulings. Even rational inquiry and empirical evidence have roles where they do not usurp scripture but help extract principles of compassion fitting modern humanitarian standards. This multiplicity of approaches guards against selective readings serving special interests.

At the core of the idea of progressive Islam lies the concept of critical traditionalism. Ebrahim Moosa explores this approach, emphasizing the need for critical engagement and intellectual inquiry. Critical Islam moves beyond static interpretations of religious texts, recognizing the evolving nature of society and the necessity for contextual

understanding. It encourages Muslims to critically reflect upon their traditions, reinterpreting them in light of contemporary challenges and aspirations.

Moosa emphasizes the importance of human dignity as the central focus of progressive and critical traditionalist approaches in Islam. He believes that all knowledge must substantiate and support the fulfilment of human dignity. If knowledge fails to deliver on this principle, it becomes questionable. Accordingly, interpretations of the past that have characterized non-Muslims or women in a derogatory manner are deemed undignified and in need of change. Moosa asserts that true transformation can only occur when individuals are willing to ask critical questions and challenge the prevailing paradigm of interpretation.

In the context of progressive Islam, the emphasis on human dignity serves as a guiding principle for reevaluating and reinterpreting Islamic teachings. It calls for a critical examination of traditional understandings that may perpetuate inequality, exclusion, or injustice. By adopting alternative methodological approaches (as documented below) , Muslims are encouraged to find answers that align with the values of dignity, fairness, and equality. This nuanced understanding allows for the continued relevance and adaptability of Islamic teachings while ensuring a more inclusive and compassionate approach to contemporary challenges.

Progressive Islam, therefore, is not about discarding the core principles of Islam but rather, it is a call to engage in a thoughtful and critical re-examination of Islamic texts and traditions to extract teachings that uphold human dignity and promote justice. It encourages a dynamic interaction between tradition and contemporary realities, seeking to harmonize Islamic values with the lived experiences of individuals and communities.

By embracing a critical traditionalist approach, progressive Islam invites

Muslims to challenge and transcend outdated interpretations that no longer align with the principles of human dignity. It encourages believers to confront biases, prejudices, and inequalities embedded within traditional interpretations and to seek alternative understandings that promote a more equitable and inclusive society. This approach requires intellectual courage, open dialogue, and a willingness to question established norms.

In the pursuit of progressive Islam, Muslims are called upon to critically engage with the rich intellectual and spiritual heritage of the faith. It is through this engagement that new insights and understandings can emerge, providing a solid foundation for a more compassionate, just, and equitable Islamic discourse. By embracing critical traditionalism, Muslims can navigate the complexities of the modern world while remaining rooted in the timeless wisdom of their faith. So, in the rest of the essays the phrase critical Islam/critical Islamic traditionalism and progressive Islam are to be used interchangeably.

Critical-Progressive Islam: An Outline

Adis Duderija

As a male person of Muslim background (Bosnian Muslim by birth) and as someone who came of age around the time of 9/11, I have sought ways to understand my faith that is affirmative of Goodness and Love as well as open to potential goodness and love in every human being. This search set me off on a journey that eventually had me embark upon a career in academia and come to dedicate much of it to the theorising of progressive Islam. The fruits of this labour of love include two [books](#), the second of which, the [Imperatives of Progressive Islam](#) was published in early 2017.

In this essay, I will draw upon my previous scholarship to provide an overview of the worldview underpinning progressive Islam, its approach to conceptualising and interpreting the Islamic tradition, its theology and its normative imperatives. In doing so, I wish to present a less well known but no less authentic understanding of Islam that will hopefully challenge what many non- Muslims and Muslims think about what Islam was, is or can ever be.

Introduction and Overview

Progressive Islam is an umbrella term covering approaches to the Islamic tradition and (late) modernity, which employ the words “progressive” or at times “critical” (e.g., the magazine *Critical Muslim* published in the United Kingdom) when labelling themselves or which fall into Progressive Islam as defined herein. The main theoreticians behind this contemporary Muslim thought are academics and public intellectuals from both Muslim majority and Muslim minority contexts and include scholars like Hassan Hanafi from Egypt; Enes Karic from Bosnia, Ali Ashghar Engineer from India; Nurkolich Majid from Indonesia, Sadiyya Shaikh, Ebrahim Moosa and Farid Esack from South Africa; Ziba Mir Hosseini and Mohsen Kadivar from Iran; Muhammad Abed Al-Jabiri from Morocco; Jasmine Zine from Canada; Hashim Kamali from Afghanistan/Malaysia; Kecia Ali from the United States; Abdulaziz Sachedina from Tanzania/USA; Abdullahi An’Naim for Sudan; Khalid Masud from Pakistan; and Khaled Abou El Fadl from Egypt /USA to name but prominent few. Importantly, progressive Muslim academics and intellectuals include a significant number of females. Progressive Muslim thought also has a global grassroots activist presence associated with Muslims for Progressive Values, Musawah, and like-minded movements.

In terms of its overall worldview, Progressive Islam is best characterized by its commitment and fidelity to certain ideals, values, practices, and objectives that are expressed in many ways and take form in a number of different themes. These themes primarily concern issues pertaining to progressive Muslims’ critical positioning in relation to (1) the hegemonic economic, political, social, and cultural forces from the Global North, (2) hegemonic patriarchal, exclusivist, and ethically ossified interpretations of their own inherited Islamic tradition, and (3) the values underpinning both Enlightenment modernity as well as radical forms of postmodern thought. This critique, therefore, simultaneously challenges both (neo-)traditional and puritan Islamic hegemonic discourses on many issues (including the debates on modernity, human rights, gender

equality and justice, democracy, and the place and role of religion in society and politics) and their Western-centric conceptualizations and interpretations, embedded as they are in the values, worldview, and assumptions underpinning the Enlightenment.

One of the main concepts permeating progressive Muslim thought is the centrality of spirituality and the nurturing of interpersonal relationships based on Sufi-like ethico-moral philosophy. By this I mean an intellectualised form of Sufism that exists without the accompanying misogynist and highly hierarchical elements present in much of the pre-modern Sufi tradition. Moreover, progressive Muslims emphasise God's universal nature and the universality of the faith itself through demonstrating God's concern for humanity in general which as, I will outline below, leads to them to embracing religious pluralism.

Cultivating and strengthening the multifaceted and dynamic aspects of the inherited Islamic tradition and resisting its reductionism and exclusivist interpretation founded on patriarchy, misogyny, and religious bigotry is an important additional trait underpinning the worldview of Progressive Islam.

Progressive Muslims are also very critical of the hegemony of the modern free market-based economics, political and social structures, institutions, and powers that support, maintain, or are not critical of the (unjust) status quo. This constellation of forces is often called "The Empire," and progressive Muslims consider it to have brought about the transformation and the reduction of a human, a carrier of God's spirit, into a primarily economic consumer that has contributed to the great economic disparities between the majority world of the poor South and the minority world of the rich North.

Progressive Muslims also wish to shift the current discourses on jihad from being primarily embedded in overly geopolitical and security and terrorist related analytical and conceptual matrixes to that of inner intellectual and ethical and principally non-violent struggle and

resistance to forces that conflict with their overall worldview.

Progressive Muslims consider the nature of the concept of the Islamic intellectual tradition (turath) to be a dynamic, humanly constructed product of many past and present communities of interpretation. The concept of cultural cum religious authenticity (*asala*) in progressive Muslim thought is not based upon a literal clinging to the Islamic tradition but on a creative, critical engagement with it. In this sense progressive Islam can be conceptualised as a form of critical Islamic traditionalism. Progressive Islamic consciousness is firmly rooted in Islamic tradition itself and is uncompromisingly cosmopolitan in its outlook. Importantly, the theory and practice of progressive Islam has the ability to redefine the very meaning of Islam in light of late modernity without abandoning the parameters of faith.

Progressive Muslims' approach to, and engagement with, modernity is also characterized by an attempt to problematize the history of debate between Islam and modernity or between Islam and the West which conceptualizes the two as being mutually exclusive. Moreover, progressive Muslims' understanding of the historical processes leading to modernity in the West considers them a result of trans- cultural and inter- civilisational processes, thereby challenging the often-made claim that modernity is a purely Western civilisational product. Therefore, progressive Islam is in this sense not 'Western.'

Why 'Progressive' in Progressive Islam

The concept of "progress" in progressive Muslim thought is conceptualised as the possibility and not inevitability of change. In other words progressive Muslim thought does not subscribe to the idea of Eurocentric, Age of Enlightenment approach to 'progress' as a deterministic process, but rather to the idea that progress, including moral progress, is possible in a variety of different forms and from different sources. Therefore, progressive Muslim thought breaks away from unilinear conceptualisations of progress either in their western

scientific, political (e.g. Fukoyama) or philosophical (e.g. Hegel) dimensions. Again, in this sense progressive Islam is not ‘secular.’

The idea of progress also stems from progressive Muslim scholars’ conviction that the primary sources of Islamic teachings, the Quran and Sunna, were progressive in approaching ethical and legal issues of their times by embodying and calling for a more ethical vision beyond what was prevalent and customary. Progressive Islam wants to stay true to this vision.

The concept of progress in progressive Islam also signifies that ethical values like justice and fairness do not remain frozen in time. As collective human experience testifies, they are in principle, subject to change as God’s creative powers bear down directly on our own collective reason and our collective ethico- moral compass. Progressive Muslim thought considers that it is the role of every individual to ever more faithfully approximate the Divine as the source of absolute Beauty, Justice and Mercy and that is only possible if our ethical systems do not remain frozen (as in case of traditionalist/pre- modern based approaches). As such, progressive Islam theorizes Islamic theology, ethics and law in such a manner to allow space for ethico- moral progress/improvement in the never ending quest for ethical perfection.

Another reason why progressive Muslim thought employs the term ‘progressive’ is to highlight the strong affinities in the kind of theologies/ philosophies, interpretational approaches and socio- political and ethical values that exist among progressive religious/spiritual movements worldwide such as the Network of Spiritual Progressives.

Normative Imperatives of Progressive Islam

In terms of its conceptualizing and interpreting the Islamic tradition, progressive Islam can be further characterised by subscribing to a number of ‘imperatives.’ By the concept of imperative in progressive Muslim thought I refer to certain theological, moral, and ethical

principles that the community agrees ought to guide principled actions of those who believe in the Islamic message and which are considered to be in accordance with the foundational Islamic textual sources. Importantly, these normative imperatives are considered to be applicable to all humanity, since they are premised on the belief in pre-theoretical and pre-conventional concepts of truth and justice that do not presuppose faith. In the context of Islam as a religious tradition, this translates itself in the idea of Islam being an ethico-religious worldview whose anchoring value is the idea of what could be termed the ethics of responsibility in which humans as stewards of God's creation have the responsibility to act justly and fight for justice even if it is against their own self-interests.

Epistemological Openness and Methodological Fluidity

By this it is meant that proponents of progressive Islam do not subscribe to commonly employed dichotomies such as tradition versus modernity and secularism versus religion, or to simplistic generalization such as modernity equals Western or Judeo-Christian intellectual/civilizational tradition. As such, the proponents of progressive Islam are engaged in permanent dialogue with the progressive agendas of other cultures, drawing inspiration not only from faith-based liberatory movements such as liberation theology (see below), but also from movements that are premised outside a faith-based framework, such as secular humanism. I refer to this aspect of progressive Muslim thought as epistemological progressivism.

This is in contrast to non-progressive based approaches to the Islamic tradition whose worldview and the very concept of the Islamic tradition itself is premised on what could be called epistemological arrest and methodological closure. According to these approaches authenticity is locked in the past and the past is constantly imposing itself onto the present leaving little or no room for meaningful, consequential, creative,

and innovative thought.

Islamic Liberation Theology

Progressive Muslim scholars consider theology of liberation to be an absolute imperative for Muslims living in the current socio-political and wider geopolitical context. This context includes the traumatic legacy of colonialism; the growing gap between rich and poor in general and between rich and poor Muslims in particular; the aggressive spread of forms of Islamic puritanism/fundamentalism and their alliance with imperialist neo-liberal capitalism whose epicentre is in the West (and more specifically in the United States of America); and the political, economic and social impotence of various secular/liberal/modernist as well as conservative mainstream forms of political Islam.

In fact, the emergence of Islamic liberation theology as conceptualized by progressive Muslim scholars examined below has been inspired in significant part through their engagement with the pioneers of liberation theology in the Christian majority world context such as G. Gutiérrez, C. Torres, and L. Boeff, to name but the most prominent few. Shabbir Akhtar, one of the main proponents and pioneers of Islamic liberation theology, goes as far as to suggest that Islamic liberation theology is in fact an Islamization of Christianity. This stands as a strong example of progressive Muslim thinking that finds inspiration in movements and schools of thought that are not necessarily part of the historical experience of Islam's concrete historical trajectory but which are considered as being in accordance with its overall ideals, values, and objectives.

Much like their Christian liberation theology counterparts, in whose work they find sources of inspiration, progressive Muslim scholars consider faith to be an indispensable and vital stimulus for struggle against oppression and injustice at the grassroots level. These scholars have moved away from many aspects of mainstream accommodationist interpretations of Islamic theology that are irreconcilable with the ideals,

values, and objectives of (Islamic) liberation theology as outlined above. As a result, the progressive Muslim scholars have used sophisticated methodologies and hermeneutics in systematic and creative efforts to reinterpret many fundamental concepts of their creed, including core theological concepts, in order to reflect their commitment to theology of liberation. For example: (1) for progressive Muslim scholars, the concept of Revelation is not a theocentric but anthropo-centric concept which brings humanity rather than God into full historical limelight as subject of study; (2) the five pillars of Islam are considered as religious in their form but political in nature as their content implies free will, freedom to act, responsibility for one's actions and hence the need to establish justice and fight injustice; and (3) the concept of tawhid (usually understood as a theological concept describing 'Divine Unity' as a central tenet of Islamic theology) is considered to be an action-oriented belief system which affirms emancipatory and liberatory practices of the entire humankind and resists oppression, tyranny and injustice.

Engaging in a quintessential progressive Muslim's 'multiple critique,' progressive Muslim scholars are also relentlessly scrutinizing all forces and structures responsible for perpetuation of oppression and injustice regardless of whether these emanate from outside or within of the Islamic tradition and irrespective of the race, ethnic or gender-based identities of their victims.

Progressive Islamic theology as Islamic liberation theology, therefore, gives priority to orthopraxis over orthodoxy. The human and the human condition are central to this type of theology. Furthermore, this theology, holds that humans are considered to experience the Divine most readily and immediately through their interactions with other human beings rather than by contemplating abstractly on the Divine, observing nature, or engaging in various spiritual exercises (i.e. ritual).

This theological orientation, favours inductive over deductive reasoning/thinking because its foundation and starting point is the world of the human condition with its incredible diversities (including

religious) and complexity which makes it very difficult to think in binary terms (e.g. having salvation – v. not having salvation). In addition, it is more likely to be open to and accommodating of the idea of religious pluralism; i.e. the premise that none of the reified religious traditions made in the crucible of history (as well as those in the present and the future) are capable of objectively and fully capturing the Divine, thus none can claim monopoly over God. This, in turn, translates into the notion that, according to this progressive theology, the idea of God is not fully graspable to the human either through their intellect, mind, reason or ‘heart.’

By definition, such a theological orientation also implies that the sacred scriptures cannot offer us humans an unequivocal, clearly accessible and once and for all valid understanding of God through the simple process of reading/interpretation. Instead, it considers the human interpreter and her subjectivities and contingencies as most significantly determinative of a process of interpretation that is envisaged as a never ending dynamic process that continually evolves with reason. There is, in other words, an organic and dialectical relationship between revelation and reality. Furthermore, this theology gives precedence to reason- based ethics over law. It insists that law must be in constant service of ethics and that law ought to transform alongside evolving ideas about ethics as developed by humanity. This theology holds that in the post- revelatory period this evolution is exclusively driven by reason/intellect. Put succinctly, this theology embraces and even thrives on pluralism, diversity, and what is fundamental to all of it: uncertainty.

A Human Rights Based Approach to Islamic Tradition

The last three to four decades have witnessed an increasing internationalization of human rights discourse as a global platform for the contemporary language of progressive politics with its focus on eradication of all types of inequalities which perpetuate, or are complicit in, various social injustices around the world. The question of the compatibility of Islam and human rights at a theoretical and conceptual

level has been a prominent theme in this regard.

Speaking in broad terms, progressive Muslim scholars, approach the issue of compatibility or the relationship between modern human rights discourse and the Islamic tradition by placing both in a historical perspective. In agreement with the proponents of non- western forms of human rights schemes, such as that of Bueventura de Santos, progressive Muslim scholars are engaged in developing a theoretical framework for a constructive encounter between the two human right schemes at the level of abstract concepts. In doing so, progressive Muslim scholars seek to weave the ethos and the culture of human rights discourse into the social and cultural fabric of Muslim- majority societies in order for those rights to be more effectively realized in the political and legal realms of these societies.

As such, progressive Muslim scholars are interested in engendering Islamic human rights schemes which are sensitive to the historical, ethical, and religious sentiments of Muslims but which are in agreement with or compatible with those of the modern human rights schemes at the conceptual level. In other words, progressive Muslim thinkers aim to theoretically affirm the conceptual compatibility between Islamic doctrine and the modern human rights scheme. For this to take place, progressive Muslim scholars highlight the importance of developing a fresh, rigorous and systematic methodology of interpretation of the fountainheads of the Islamic worldview, the Quran and the Sunna. This methodology is based on rational Islamic theology and ethics briefly described above, as well as on a particular conceptualization of divine ontology whose central tenets are justice and mercy. These values, in turn, are considered to be sources of universal moral values that are to be extended to and applicable equally to all of humanity. This argument rests on the basis that each and every human being is considered a unique creation of God having equal, dignity, moral worth, and moral agency. According to progressive Muslim scholars, this view is deeply embedded in the Qur'anic worldview itself. Hence, each individual is entitled to enjoying the same inalienable rights both at the level of individuals as

well as members of different communities, including the political.

Rationalist and Contextualist Approaches to Islamic Theology and Ethics

The issue concerning the nature of socio-ethical norms and values and their relationship with Islamic law and jurisprudence is another prominent theme in progressive Muslim thought. In many ways, the proponents of progressive Muslim thought consider the issue of ethics in general to be one of the most pressing challenges to the Islamic tradition in the contemporary age. In order to meet these challenges progressive Muslim scholars seek to (re-) discover/recover and build further on rationalist approaches to Islamic theology and ethics.

In order to do so, progressive Muslim scholars rely on two interpretational mechanisms in particular. One I term “comprehensive contextualization” and the other “teleological” or “purposive” Qur’an-Sunna hermeneutics. Comprehensive contextualisation is premised on the idea that the social and ethico-legal injunctions featured in the Qur’an and Sunna largely reflected the prevalent customary norms but did not initiate them. This applies to laws pertaining to gender relations (e.g. inheritance laws, divorce laws) and to laws regarding corporal punishments (known as the hudud) as well as others. As such they should not be viewed as universal aspects of the Islamic teachings. Purposive Islamic hermeneutics begins with the belief that the social and ethico-legal elements found in the primary texts of Islamic teachings, when approached holistically and contextually, point to certain moral trajectories that go beyond the immediate moral and ethical horizons within which Qur’an (and Sunna) initially operated. It is these moral trajectories, that manifest in the form of certain ethical ideals and values, that Islamic ethics and law seek to fulfil and preserve while being fully aware that these ethical values and ideals will require new articulations and conceptualisations in the light of new contexts. In this view, what was at one point *ma’ruf* may no longer be appropriate to fulfil the Islamic

ethical ideals in a new context. For example, while the Qur'an and Sunna emphasise the concept of justice, this could require something different from Muslims in a world that speaks of gender, race, class, capitalism, and colonization than it did at the time of the Qur'an.

Importantly, both principles are premised on a rationalist theology and ethics that interpretationally privilege the spirit over the letter of Islamic ethics/law. In other words, Progressive Islamic hermeneutics is characterized by its emphasis on the role of context and history (i.e. the nature of previous communities of interpretation) in interpreting the foundational Islamic texts without questioning their ontologically divine nature.

These interpretational mechanisms, in turn, enable progressive Muslim thought to escape the hermeneutical confines of traditional Islamic law and ethics. Furthermore, these approaches accommodate and exist in harmony with contemporary conceptualizations of ethico- moral values such as justice and gender equality.

Social and Gender Justice

Commitment to social and gender justice, including the theorising of indigenous Islamic feminism, is another important pillar of progressive Muslim's approach to the Islamic

tradition. In this respect a number of progressive Muslim scholars have developed very systematic and sophisticated non- patriarchal Qur'an- Sunna/hadith hermeneutical models which affirm gender-just interpretations of Islam and counter the prevalent patriarchal alternatives. These non-patriarchal Qur'an- Sunna hermeneutical models are characterized by the kind of interpretational principles outlined in the previous section.

Although acknowledging that both feminism and Islam are highly contested evaluative concepts which elicit and hold various meanings

to different actors participating in the debates on Islam and gender, progressive Muslim scholars consider that the term ‘feminism’ has currency in the context of Islamic tradition for a number of reasons including the following: (i) the existence of Islamic feminism transcends and destroys the inaccurate and artificial conceptual dichotomies and polarities between religion versus secularism, ‘East’ versus ‘West,’ and Modernity versus Tradition, which have been employed to deny rights to Muslim women; (ii) the premise that there can be no long- lasting and sustainable gains in women’s rights unless patriarchal notions of family and gender relations are debated, challenged, and redressed within an Islamic framework; and (iii) its ability to highlight the importance of gender justice in conceptualising Islam as a normative tradition.

Affirmation of Religious Pluralism and Diversity

Progressive Muslim scholars theorise and affirm the normative validity of pluralism, including the religious, on number of levels. In addition to what I have described above, these include the inescapable pluralism at the level of understanding religious texts (hermeneutics/scriptural reasoning), and at the level of religious experiences; some thinkers consider this pluralism as Divinely willed. In doing so, they build further on pluralistic tendencies present in the pre- modern Islamic tradition as, for example found, in the writings of sages such as Ibn al- ‘Arabi and Jalaluddin al- Rumi. However, progressive Muslim thought does not embrace radical forms of postmodern pluralism/relativism but rather that of pluralism based on reasoned plurality of truths and, generally speaking, also defend the normative validity of religious pluralism in accordance with perennial philosophy approaches. This recognition of pluralism and diversity, including in the realm of religion, in turn, plays a number of very important functions in the progressive Muslim thought. For example, the idea of irreducible diversity and pluralism forms the basis for human moral responsibility to be just and humble. Pluralism and diversity are also considered as necessary preconditions, philosophically speaking, for understanding ontologically true meaning of the human condition as such.

Conclusion

I am convinced that progressive Islam offers the best answers to many of the challenges that contemporary Muslims are facing and that, along with other progressive minded spiritual, religious political, social and economic progressive forces, can contribute to the flourishing of the human spirit and indeed all of the God's creation. More specifically, I hope that the ideas inherent to the theory and practice of progressive Islam can shift the current views about the nature and place of Islam in the contemporary world among both Muslims and non- Muslims based as they are on Islam's onto- logical securitisation in the age of the 'War on Terror;' Islam as the religion of poor and the alien immigrant; Islam as a religion of dictators in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim majority world to a view of an Islam as a cosmopolitan, intellectual and ethically beautiful force that can meaningfully contribute to the furthering of the common good of the entire humanity and the planet.

How Critical-Progressive Islam Can Help Overcome Islamic Sectarianism

Adis Duderija

Given the increase in Muslim sectarianism over the last decade or so, especially in the [Middle East](#), one would be forgiven for asking whether the idea of Muslims transcending the historical and religious Sunni-Shi'i divides today would ever be possible (even if one is of the view that it is highly desirable).

The extensive recent incidents of 'sectarian' or religiously-motivated/rationalized brutality and ongoing oppression of numerous Muslim communities by other Muslims (both inside and across sectarian boundaries), which have brought about various passing lives, legitimize uncertainty and absence of trust in this regard. In any case, this exceptionally dreary picture ought not discourage us from attempts to enhance the circumstance, troublesome as it is. To put it another way, the choice of keeping up the status quo is presently deficient for most Muslims today from both moral and religious/theological perspectives.

Part of the solution is that the intellectual and the lived reality-based arguments for transcending Muslim sectarianism are already in place in the form of what I refer to as the theory of [progressive Islam](#).

Failures of Intra-Muslim Ecumenicalism

The growing ecumenical attitude among various religious customs (between religions) and acknowledgment of pluralism that cannot be decreased has gone far as of late, no less than in theory.

I say this as someone who has been active in inter-faith dialogue (predominantly between the Abrahamic religions) for over 20 years at the grassroots level as well as someone who has an academic interest in the topic. However, the ecumenical spirit at intra-Muslim level has not kept pace with these developments; and with a few exceptions such as the [Aman Message](#) (2006) there are [hardly any](#) formal institutional efforts that have this aim.

The challenges of sectarianism in the Muslim World can be attributed, in part, to the failure of Muslims to explore new perspectives on Islam and its intellectual tradition. By adopting alternative approaches that transcend historical divides between Sunnis and Shi'is, Muslims have the potential to overcome animosities and promote unity. Progressive Islam and progressive Muslim thought offer a pathway to displace prevailing sectarian narratives and bridge the Sunni-Shi'i divide.

Progressive Muslim Thought is Uniquely Positioned to Overcome these Divides

In my work, the theory of progressive Islam draws from the scholarship of Sunni and Shi'i scholars. These scholars, such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, Abdulla Saeed, Kecia Ali, Hassan Hanafi, Sadiyya Shaikh, Ebrahim Moosa, Muhammad Al-Jabiri, Z. Mir-Hosseini, A. Sachedina, M. Kadivar, Y. Eshkevari, and A. K. Soroush, offer perspectives that reframe and approach the Islamic intellectual and cultural heritage in a way that challenges or diminishes the religious and doctrinal factors that have contributed to the divisions between Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies. It is important to note that the pillars of progressive Islam do not revolve

around the specific issues and doctrines that have traditionally divided Sunnis and Shi'is, such as religious authority, views on the Prophet Muhammad's Companions, or political theologies like imamate and caliphate. From the perspective of progressive Islam, these Sunni and Shi'i doctrines and beliefs mentioned above are not considered religiously binding.

I define mainstream Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies as they have been defined in the abovementioned [Amman Message](#), namely as forms of Islam which “specifically recognised the validity of all 8 Mathhabs (legal schools) of Sunni, Shi'a and Ibadhi Islam; of traditional Islamic Theology (Ash'arism); of Islamic Mysticism (Sufism), and of true Salafi thought, and came to a precise definition of who is a Muslim.” These orthodoxies were laid around the fifth century of the Islamic calendar and continue to this day.

The ‘Pillars’ of Progressive Islam and Islamic Sectarianism

Progressive Islam considers the doctrines and beliefs associated with specific Sunni and Shi'i traditions as purely historical rather than religiously binding. Additionally, the defining characteristics of progressive Islam extend beyond the epistemological, hermeneutical, and methodological boundaries within which both Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies operate. As a result, progressive Islam not only surpasses the limitations of Sunni/Shi'i orthodoxies but does so without compromising its own fundamental principles and pillars.

Creative, Critical and Innovative Thought Based on Epistemological Openness and Methodological Fuidity

One important aspect of progressive Islam is its rejection of simplistic dichotomies such as tradition versus modernity or secularism versus religion. Progressive Muslim thinkers do not equate modernity

solely with Western or Judeo-Christian intellectual and civilizational traditions. Instead, they engage in ongoing dialogue with progressive movements from various cultures, drawing inspiration from liberation theology, feminism, secular humanism, and others. This approach allows progressive Muslim thought to break free from the interpretations of the sacred past imposed by mainstream Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies, which are often presented as non-negotiable aspects of being a Sunni or Shi'i. Progressive Muslim thought does not automatically prioritize the sacred past in these ways or at all, and it remains open to new ideas and re-conceptualizations of the inherited intellectual and cultural heritage (turath). Through this openness, it seeks to creatively and authentically transform the tradition.

Historicist and Contextualist Approaches to Islamic Theology and Doctrines

Progressive Muslim scholars aim to revive and expand upon historicist and contextualist approaches to Islamic theology, particularly concerning the concept of revelation, scriptural reasoning, and the development of Islamic theologies, doctrines, and sectarian soteriologies. They view these aspects as products of historical processes that are continuously reinterpreted and appropriated by diverse religious and political actors. As a result, all elements of Islamic belief, including those associated with the sectarian theologies of salvation of Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies, are not regarded as definitive or conclusive. Instead, they are open to revision and critical examination within the framework of progressive Muslim thought.

Moreover, progressive Muslim theology has many affinities with process theology associated with scholars such as C.H. Hartshorne, J. Cobb and D.R. Griffin, and is a form of Islamic process theology that moves away from classical theistic view of God and God's relationship with the cosmos and the entire creation. In this sense, Islamic [process theology](#) is grounded in theories of revelation and religious experience emphasised

by Islamic scholars such as Ibn al ‘Arabi, M. Iqbal, Nasir Abu Zayd and A.K. Soroush who emphasise the ideas of process and centrality of religious experience as contingent and dynamic.

A Human Rights-based Approach to Islamic Tradition

Sunni and Shi’i contemporary orthodoxies maintain pre-modern approaches to defining valid knowledge and the methods used to attain it. This also extends to their perspectives on the concept of turath (intellectual and cultural heritage) and their theological frameworks regarding the nature of God and God’s relationship with the Universe and its creation. Their epistemological stance being pre-modern has resulted in tensions between these orthodoxies and contemporary human rights frameworks, particularly in regard to the conceptualization of human dignity and human rights.

Both Sunni and Shi’i orthodoxies, in relation to their view of the human being, contain a set of ethical, moral and legal rights and responsibilities that differentiate individuals on the basis of their religious belonging (in addition to gender and social class), privileging those that belong to their version of Islam. As such, as argued by scholars such as [Sachedina](#) and [An Naim](#), they are incompatible with the paradigms of modern human rights schemes.

Progressive Muslim thought adopts an epistemologically (post) modern approach to the concept of turath (intellectual and cultural heritage), influenced by a weak form of post-modernism as described by Sayla Benhabib. Scholars like Sachedina and An Na’im address the compatibility between modern human rights discourse and the Islamic tradition by placing both within an historical context. This historicist methodology is partially based on a particular understanding of divine ontology, emphasizing justice and mercy as central principles. These values are seen as sources of universal moral values that apply to all of humanity, regardless of religion or gender. Progressive Muslim thought subscribes to the belief that each human being is a unique creation

of God, possessing equal dignity, moral worth, and moral agency, irrespective of religious affiliation. Consequently, every individual and community, including the political sphere, is entitled to the same inalienable rights. Building on this human rights approach, progressive Muslim scholars lay the groundwork for integrating the ethos and culture of modern human rights discourse into the theological, social, and cultural fabric of Muslim-majority societies. This approach transcends the limitations of Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies, including in the realms of women's rights and minority rights.

Islamic Liberation Theology

Progressive Muslim theologians, such as Hassan Hanafi, Ashgar Ali, Farid Esack, and Shabbir Akhtar, view the concept of revelation as primarily anthropocentric rather than theocentric. They emphasize the role of humanity as the subject of study and bring it into the historical spotlight. They also contend that the so-called five pillars of Islam, while having religious form, have a political nature. These pillars imply the exercise of free will, the freedom to act, and the responsibility for one's actions, which necessitate the establishment of justice and the fight against injustice. Additionally, the concept of tawhid (Divine Unity), traditionally understood as a theological concept, is seen by progressive Muslim theologians as an action-oriented belief system. It affirms emancipatory and liberatory practices for all of humankind and resists oppression, tyranny, and injustice, regardless of their source. In contrast to Sunni and, to some extent, Shi'i orthodoxies, progressive Islamic theology prioritizes orthopraxis (right action) over orthodoxy (right belief). In other words, it places the human and the human condition at the center, rather than rigid adherence to a set of beliefs and doctrines.

Affirmation of Religious Pluralism

Progressive Muslim theology embraces and thrives on pluralism, diversity, and the inherent uncertainty of religious understanding.

Unlike mainstream Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies, which often limit salvation to Muslims in a rigid sense, progressive Muslim scholars like A.K. Soroush and Farid Esack theorise and affirm the normative validity of religious pluralism and pluralistic soteriology on various levels. They recognize pluralism at the epistemological level, distinguishing between the abstract concept of "religion" and the tangible, complex, and historical nature of religious knowledge. They also acknowledge the inevitable pluralism in the interpretation of religious texts through hermeneutics and scriptural reasoning. Additionally, progressive Muslim scholars recognize pluralism at the level of religious experiences, understanding them as contingent and dynamic.

This affirmation of religious pluralism and the idea that multiple religious traditions can provide guidance towards salvation serves an essential role in progressive Muslim thought. It forms the basis for how progressive Muslim thought conceptualizes the moral responsibility of humans to be just and humble. Religious and salvific pluralism are seen as necessary philosophical preconditions for understanding the true ontological meaning of the human condition, going beyond the boundaries of Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies that often rely on the logic of the superiority of a believer over a non-believer.

Building a Critical Mass

Beyond theory, I also believe that there is a [critical mass](#) of well-informed Muslims, for whom the historical processes that have led to what today is known as Sunni and Shi'i Islam are not fundamental to how they view or relate to themselves as Muslims.

Their understanding of being Muslim is rooted in the approaches I have described, which are characteristic of progressive Islam. This form of Islam focuses less on (political) theology and more on cultivating an inclusive, socially just Islam with an ecumenical spirit. It extends beyond the confines of a narrow interpretation of Islam and embraces religious diversity. I firmly believe that endorsing and encouraging this approach

to Islam is crucial today for numerous reasons, benefiting Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and addressing a range of issues that extend beyond sectarianism within the Muslim community.

What it Means to Be a “Critical-Progressive Islamist”

Adis Duderija

The Muslim intellectual tradition is full of instances of contestation over the meaning and implications of many of its major concepts — such as *sunna* (custom or habit), salafism, *īmān* (belief or faith), *tawhīd* (oneness or unity), and *jihad* (struggle), to name but the most prominent few.

It is little wonder, then, that these and other major concepts in the Muslim intellectual tradition have been appropriated throughout Muslim history by various religious and/or political actors, with various degrees of success. Hence certain groups or actors were able to monopolise some of these concepts and came to be regarded — or, indeed, simply to regard themselves — as their most faithful, if not the *only* legitimate, interpreters.

This history of contested interpretations is sometimes forgotten in the analysis of various aspects of contemporary Islam, including in the political sphere. One such concept is that of Islamism (*Islāmīyyūn / Islāmīyyīn*), which emerged in the context of a modern, postcolonial nation-state in the Muslim majority world. As it is commonly known, “Islamism” refers to political movements that oppose the “secular” authoritarian

political establishments in the Middle East and propose instead some kind of “Islamisation” of society.

Whilesome scholars such as [John Esposito](#), [Peter Mandaville](#), and [Andrew March](#) have attempted to problematise the category of “political Islam” as overly homogenous, none, to my knowledge, have suggested that proponents of “liberal” approaches to Islam should themselves be labelled Islamists. I suspect this is because Islamism has become so firmly associated with conservative political Muslim movements — like the Muslim Brotherhood — that a terminological fusion of sorts has taken place, such that they have become conceptually synonymous.

This, in turn, has created further terminological difficulties when such movements have evolved in their political thinking and approach to Islam, sparking discussions on the phenomenon known as “post-Islamism” — a term often applied to the Muslim Brotherhood itself in Egypt after the 1990s. Another more recent development is the introduction of a new concept — namely, that of Muslim democrats, as a substitute for “Islamist.” The post-“Arab Spring” Tunisian An Nahda party is a prime example. Indeed, [it has been argued](#) that the term “Islamism” was not applicable to this political party because of its commitment to democratic processes.

The unfortunate consequence of accepting these changes in terminology is that it reinforces the idea that only the politically undemocratic forms of Islam deserve to be called “Islamist.” This includes their views on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, as well as their largely pragmatic approach to electoral democracy, as seen with the puritanical Islamists in Egypt.

It is imperative, I believe, that we destabilise and ultimately decouple this conceptual fusion between Islamism and conservative or puritanical expressions of political Islam, in light of the long history of contestation and appropriation of major concepts in the Islamic tradition, as well as the emergence of another distinct form of political Islam —

namely, progressive Islam, which has its own interpretation of [Muslim intellectual history and Islamic hermeneutic](#).

Accordingly, I would like to introduce a new conceptual category of [progressive Islamism](#), based on a progressive Muslim interpretation of Islam that has real political implications. Unlike the vast majority of conservative forms of Islamism, progressive Islamism is cosmopolitan in outlook, embraces constitutional democracy and contemporary ideas on human rights, gender equality, and vibrant civil society. Progressive Islamism is broadly associated with the work of Muslim scholars such as Abdulaziz Sachedina, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Hassan Hanafi, Nurcholish Majid, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, Abdullahi An-Na'im, Ahmad Moussalli, Hashim Kamali, Muqtader Khan, and Nader Hashemi — their differences notwithstanding.

A progressive Islamist is someone who seriously and critically engages with the full spectrum of the Islamic tradition (turāth), and considers Islam not just as a matter of individual or private belief, but as having profound relevance in the political arena — but only in accordance with the above principles (cosmopolitan, democratic, committed to human rights and gender equality, invested in a vibrant civil society).

To be a progressive Islamist also means to subscribe to Islamic liberation theology as theorised by progressive-minded Muslim scholars like Shabbir Akhtar, Ali Ashgar Engineer, and Farid Esack. The rediscovery of Islamic liberation theology is of critical importance for Muslims in the twenty-first century, not least because of: the long shadow of the traumatic legacy of colonialism; the growing gap between the rich and poor, in general, and between rich and poor Muslims, in particular; the aggressive spread of forms of Islamic puritanism/fundamentalism and their unholy alliance with centres of neo-liberal capitalist power; and the political, economic, and social impotence of various secular, liberal, modernist, as well as conservative and mainstream forms of political Islam.

This theological stance is, in fact, emblematic of progressive Muslims' quintessential "multiple critique" approach, which engages in a relentless criticism of all forms of dehumanisation and oppression on the basis of radical love and nonviolent forms of resistance rooted in the belief in the God who is Most Merciful and Most Compassionate.

Importantly for the proponents of progressive Muslim thought, adopting Islamic liberation theology also necessitates a radical rethinking of the traditionalist understanding of Islamic law, ethics, and ontology (Shari'ah) in the light of God's preferential option for the poor, downtrodden, and marginalised. This could involve issues as diverse as: the reformulation of the very concepts, aims, and objectives on which Islamic theology, ethics, and law (especially Muslim family law) are premised; the transformation of Islamic finance and economics for the purposes of real economic justice; and the recasting of Islamic politics in order to align them with the values, ideals, and objectives of Islamic liberation theology.

In my view, this form of Islamism would offer some real solutions for those Muslim majority countries that find themselves locked in a battle between authoritarian political regimes and conservative Islamists.

Given the ongoing importance of the "Islamic" in the lives of Muslims, and the contested nature of many of the major concepts in the Islamic tradition, the neologism of a progressive Islamist would, in my view, go a long way toward problematising, destabilising, and, hopefully, conceptually decoupling the concept of Islamism/Islamist — and, more generally, the concept of Islam itself — from conservative, puritanical expressions of political Islam.

How Adoption of Progressive Islam by Muslim Scholars and Preachers Can Counteract Islamophobia

Adis Duderija

The rise of [Islamophobia in the West](#) poses a pressing challenge which requires a range of thoughtful and informed responses. As a [progressive Muslim scholar](#), I firmly believe that embracing scholarly approaches to the study of Islam — particularly when rooted in progressive interpretations of the Islamic tradition — holds great promise when it comes to effectively reducing the perceptions that fuel Islamophobia.

By contrast, the approach to Islam adopted by [some Muslim celebrity preachers](#) may perpetuate misunderstandings, reinforce stereotypes, and hinder progress in building a more inclusive society.

Muslims in Western countries frequently face [discrimination, prejudice, and even violence due to their religious identity](#). Islamophobic rhetoric and stereotypes perpetuated in some media, by certain political figures, and societal biases contribute to the marginalisation and othering of Muslims. Instances of hate crimes, mosque vandalisations, and employment discrimination are just a few examples of the real-life consequences of Islamophobia.

I am convinced that one of the best ways within the control of Muslims to counter Islamophobia is the progressive Muslim approach to the Islamic tradition. Why? Because this approach to Islam embodies a [cosmopolitan, inclusivist, and ethically beautiful](#) understanding of Islam that can provide an important corrective to Islamophobic sentiments — namely, that Islam is an inherently violent, patriarchal, and supremacist ideology.

Accordingly, I am also of the view that the approach some Muslim celebrity preachers take to the Islamic tradition can contribute to Islamophobic sentiments.

What is the Progressive Approach to Islam?

Progressive approaches to Islam emphasise the importance of [contextual understanding](#) of the Qurʾān and the importance of critical-historical analysis in the very genesis and formation of the Islamic tradition. Progressive scholars delve into the [rich tapestry of Islamic history](#), examining the diverse interpretations, social dynamics, and cultural influences that have shaped the religion.

Progressive scholars scrutinise the complex, often highly contested and multifaceted development of Islamic thought — including the religious, social, political, and cultural factors that influenced the [emergence and the interpretation of the normative texts](#), the Qurʾān and Hadith. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of Islamic teachings, dispelling harmful misconceptions and addressing those Islamophobic narratives that flatten the Islamic intellectual tradition and ignore the broader context.

In contrast, celebrity Muslim preachers [often adopt a reductionist approach to Islam](#), focusing on cherry-picked verses or ahistorical interpretations that reinforce patriarchal and supremacist beliefs. This reductionist approach ignores the complex historical and cultural factors that influenced the development of Islamic teachings, leading to

an incomplete and distorted understanding of Islam.

Such an approach, wittingly or not, reinforces Islamophobic narratives that paint Islam as inherently oppressive, backward, and incompatible with Western liberal democratic values.

The Place of Critical Thinking and Intellectual Rigor

Progressive Muslim scholars [champion](#) creative, critical thinking and intellectual rigor as essential tools in the study of Islam. By engaging in rigorous analysis, they bring forth diverse interpretations and challenge regressive readings that often fuel Islamophobia.

Progressive scholars emphasise the need for a holistic and nuanced understanding of Islamic texts. They recognise that the Qurʾān and Hadith-based texts contain a wide range of — and, at times, mutually opposing — messages that need to be interpreted holistically and in light of their [historical context](#) and overarching principles of justice, compassion, and equality. This approach allows for a more contextually sensitive understanding of Islam, one that transcends the kinds of simplistic and [heavily textualist](#) interpretations that contribute to Islamophobia.

Unfortunately, this is a far-cry from the approach taken by [some celebrity Muslim preachers](#), who rely on overly emotional and often dogmatic interpretations that reinforce patriarchal and supremacist ideologies.

Islam, Inclusivity, and Gender Equality

Scholarly approaches rooted in progressive Islam advocate for inclusivity and [gender equality](#) within the Islamic framework. Progressive scholars recognise that the Quranic principles of justice, compassion, and equality serve as the foundation for a more inclusive understanding of Islam. They challenge [patriarchal interpretations](#) and call for a re-

examination of traditional norms that perpetuate gender inequality.

Progressive scholars argue that, when approached contextually and holistically, the Qurʾān and Hadith can provide a foundation for [gender equality](#), by emphasising the equal worth and dignity of all individuals, no matter their gender. They highlight instances where women played influential roles in early Islamic history, including as scholars, entrepreneurs, and political leaders. By highlighting these examples, progressive scholars challenge the patriarchal interpretations that marginalise women and restrict their rights and freedoms.

In contrast, some Muslim celebrity preachers often [propagate a patriarchal understanding of Islam](#) that reinforces gender hierarchies and restricts the rights and freedoms of women. This approach not only marginalises Muslim women, but contributes to Islamophobia by confirming stereotypes of Islam as inherently oppressive and misogynistic.

Religious Pluralism, Interfaith Dialogue, and the Importance of Building Bridges

Progressive Muslim scholars affirm [religious pluralism](#), actively engage in [interfaith dialogue](#), and recognising the importance of building bridges of understanding and cooperation with people of different faiths as well as within the Islamic tradition. They seek common ground and emphasise shared values, working towards a society characterised by mutual respect and harmony. By fostering interfaith dialogue, progressive scholars humanise Muslims, dispel stereotypes, and challenge Islamophobic narratives rooted in ignorance and fear.

Progressive scholars approach interfaith dialogue as an opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations with individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. They not only recognise the inevitability of religious pluralism at multiple levels — metaphysical, philosophical, and

hermeneutical; they are also acutely cognisant of the fact that religious diversity is a reality in today's globalised world — and that fostering understanding and respect is essential [for social cohesion](#).

By highlighting these shared values, progressive Muslim scholars challenge the notion that Islam is inherently supremacist vis-à-vis other religious traditions, thus countering Islamophobic narratives that perpetuate division and fear.

In contrast, Muslim celebrity preachers often adopt a [supremacist and exclusivist approach to Islam](#), promoting a sense of religious superiority and alienation from people of other faiths. This approach reinforces Islamophobic narratives that depict Islam as intolerant and incompatible with religious diversity and coexistence. By failing to engage meaningfully in interfaith dialogue and promoting a reductionist and supremacist understanding of Islam, these preachers contribute to the marginalisation of Muslims and exacerbate the tendencies towards Islamophobia in Western liberal democratic countries.

The challenge for Muslims in the West

The disparity between the scholarly progressive approach to Islam and the version proffered by celebrity preachers highlights broader appeal the latter enjoys — particularly among young Muslim men. Why? Because these preachers often espouse powerful, emotion laden, God saturated rhetoric that directly speaks to their need for belonging, their sense of identity, and their grievances (perceived or real).

Speaking from the perspective of what Muslims can do from within the parameters of their own intellectual tradition to curb Islamophobia, I am convinced that a wider acceptance of progressive Muslim thought among Muslims in the West — both lay Muslims and clergy — is one of the most effective antidotes against the self-perpetuating cycle of grievance and prejudice.

For this to take place, however, Muslims in the West must adopt a more reflexive stance toward what counts as Islamic orthodoxy. And at the level of our educational institutions, we need to be able to develop robust mechanisms for intra-Muslim dialogue that truly welcome critical and innovative thought.

Progressive Muslim Thought as Contemporary Iteration of Sufi-like Ethico-Moral Philosophy

Adis Duderija

In the contemporary landscape of Islamic thought, an increasingly prominent concept is the centrality of spirituality and the cultivation of interpersonal relationships rooted in a Sufi-like ethico-moral philosophy. This progressive Muslim perspective seeks to embrace the essence of Sufism, while simultaneously rejecting the misogynistic and hierarchical elements that have historically been associated with the pre-modern Sufi tradition. Furthermore, progressive Muslims emphasize the universal nature of God and the faith itself, highlighting God's concern for humanity as a whole.

At the heart of progressive Muslim thought lies a deep appreciation for spirituality and its transformative power. Spirituality is understood as a personal and intimate connection with the Divine, transcending mere ritualistic observance and external markers of religiosity. It is an inner journey that cultivates a sense of mindfulness, self-reflection, and ethical living. Progressive Muslims draw inspiration from Sufism, a mystical tradition within Islam that emphasizes the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and the development of a loving and compassionate relationship with God.

However, progressive Muslims also recognise the need to critically examine certain aspects of the pre-modern Sufi tradition. Throughout history, Sufism has been influenced by patriarchal norms and hierarchical structures that have marginalized women and reinforced power imbalances. Progressive Muslims seek to reclaim the spiritual essence of Sufism while rejecting these elements that contradict the principles of equality, justice, and inclusivity.

In this intellectualised form of Sufism, progressive Muslims strive to create spaces that are free from gender bias and hierarchy. They promote the inclusion and active participation of women in spiritual and religious practices, recognizing their equal capacity for spiritual growth and enlightenment. By doing so, progressive Muslims challenge the traditional narratives that have relegated women to secondary roles within religious institutions and communities.

Moreover, progressive Muslims emphasise the universal nature of God and the faith itself. They reject exclusivist interpretations that limit salvation and divine favour to a particular group or sect. Instead, they emphasize the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings, regardless of their (non)-religious or cultural background. Progressive Muslims believe that God's concern extends to all of humanity, and they strive to demonstrate this through acts of compassion, justice, and service to others.

This emphasis on universality is rooted in a reinterpretation of Islamic scriptures and traditions. Progressive Muslims engage in a process of critical analysis, drawing upon the principles of reason, ethics, and social justice to reinterpret the religious texts. They recognize that the historical and cultural contexts in which these texts were revealed must be taken into account, and they seek to extract the underlying ethical principles that transcend time and place.

By emphasizing God's universal nature and the universality of the faith, progressive Muslims challenge the sectarian divisions and exclusivist

narratives that have contributed to religious intolerance and conflict. They advocate for interfaith dialogue and cooperation, recognizing that there is much to learn from other religious traditions and that there is a shared moral and ethical framework that unites humanity.

In practicing this form of progressive Islam, Muslims strive to live out their faith in a way that is inclusive, compassionate, and socially engaged. They actively work for social justice, advocating for the rights of marginalized communities, and addressing the root causes of inequality and oppression. Progressive Muslims understand that spirituality and activism are not mutually exclusive but rather interconnected, as the pursuit of justice and the alleviation of suffering are integral aspects of a spiritually fulfilling life.

Progressive Muslims emphasise the dynamic nature of Islamic thought and the ongoing process of interpretation. They argue that the principles of justice, compassion, and universality are at the core of Islam and should guide the understanding and application of religious teachings in contemporary contexts. They acknowledge the importance of engaging in dialogue with traditional scholars and communities, fostering a constructive exchange of ideas and perspectives.

In conclusion, progressive Muslim thought embraces spirituality as a central aspect of religious practice, drawing inspiration from Sufism while rejecting misogynistic and hierarchical elements. This intellectualized form of Sufism nurtures a personal connection with the Divine, emphasizing mindfulness, self-reflection, and ethical living. Progressive Muslims also emphasize the universal nature of God and the faith itself, seeking to demonstrate God's concern for humanity as a whole. By doing so, they challenge exclusivist narratives and promote inclusivity, justice, and compassion. Progressive Muslim thought represents a dynamic and evolving understanding of Islam, rooted in a critical engagement with scriptures, ethical principles, and the lived realities of diverse Muslim communities.

Progressive Islam: Key Ideas to Help the Muslim Majority World Achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

Adis Duderija

In the pursuit of sustainable development, the Muslim majority world faces a myriad of challenges. However, progressive Islam offers a compelling framework that can provide the best ideas to address these challenges effectively. With its emphasis on ecological sustainability, commitment to human rights, compatibility with institutional democracy, dedication to poverty eradication and marginalized communities, promotion of gender justice, respect for religious pluralism, and encouragement of creative and innovative thought, progressive Islam can play a pivotal role in helping Muslim-majority nations achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this essay I explore these reasons in detail, demonstrating why progressive Islam holds immense potential for fostering positive change in the Muslim majority world.

Pantheistic-Process Relational Worldview: Embracing Ecological Sustainability

At the core of progressive Islam lies a pantheistic ,process -relational worldview that recognizes the deep interconnection between humans and the environment. This worldview emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and the imperative of ecological sustainability. Progressive Islam acknowledges that the well-being and survival of both humanity and the planet are interconnected, and by promoting environmental conservation, sustainable resource management, and biodiversity protection, Muslim-majority nations can contribute significantly to the achievement of the SDGs.

The 2030 SDGs explicitly address [environmental sustainability](#) as a core goal. By integrating progressive Islamic teachings into policy frameworks, Muslim-majority nations can inspire and guide initiatives that combat climate change, reduce pollution, promote renewable energy, and preserve natural ecosystems. Additionally, progressive Islam can encourage environmentally conscious practices at the individual and community levels, fostering a sense of responsibility towards the Earth and its resources.

Commitment to Human Rights: Upholding Freedom of Expression

Progressive Islam upholds human rights as an essential aspect of religious practice. It recognizes that religion should not be used as a tool to suppress individual freedoms but as a source of inspiration to promote justice and dignity for all. By emphasizing the importance of freedom of expression and robust political rights, progressive Islam ensures that citizens, regardless of their religious or ethnic backgrounds, have equal access to opportunities and can actively participate in shaping their societies.

In the context of the 2030 SDGs, this commitment to human rights is crucial. Inclusive societies, where freedom of expression is protected and political rights are upheld, enable diverse voices to contribute to decision-making processes. This inclusivity leads to more effective policies that address poverty, inequality, and social injustice. By integrating progressive Islamic principles into governance structures, Muslim-majority nations can foster environments that empower their citizens, promote social cohesion, and drive sustainable development.

Compatibility with Institutional Democracy: Fostering Good Governance

Progressive Islam embraces the principles of institutional democracy, recognizing the importance of representative governance, accountability, and the rule of law. It encourages active citizen participation and the establishment of transparent and inclusive political systems. This compatibility with institutional democracy sets the stage for adopting best governance practices in Muslim-majority nations.

[Good governance](#) is essential for achieving the 2030 SDGs, as it ensures the effective implementation and monitoring of policies. Progressive Islamic values can promote transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in decision-making processes, leading to more efficient and sustainable development outcomes. By incorporating these principles, Muslim-majority nations can establish governance structures that prioritize the well-being of their citizens and effectively address the multifaceted challenges outlined by the SDGs.

Commitment to Liberation Theology: Eradicating Poverty and Empowering Marginalized Communities

Progressive Islam places a strong emphasis on liberation theology principles, which highlight the importance of addressing poverty and supporting marginalized and excluded communities. It recognizes

that economic justice is integral to religious practice and calls for the redistribution of wealth to ensure the well-being of all members of society.

The commitment to poverty eradication aligns perfectly with the SDG goal of [ending poverty](#) in all its forms. By embracing progressive Islamic principles, Muslim-majority nations can develop comprehensive strategies to tackle poverty effectively. These strategies may include equitable economic policies, social safety nets, access to quality education and healthcare, and targeted programs that empower marginalized communities. Through such initiatives, the Muslim majority world can contribute significantly to the global efforts of poverty reduction.

Commitment to Gender Justice: Advancing Gender Equality

Gender inequality is a pressing challenge faced by [many](#) Muslim-majority nations. Progressive Islam recognizes the importance of gender justice and advocates for equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of their gender. It challenges patriarchal norms and calls for the elimination of discriminatory practices that perpetuate gender inequality.

By prioritizing gender justice, Muslim-majority nations can make significant strides towards achieving gender equality, a [key objective](#) of the 2030 SDGs. Progressive Islamic principles can inspire legal reforms, educational initiatives, and social campaigns aimed at empowering women, ensuring their full participation in all spheres of life, and eliminating gender-based violence and discrimination. By promoting a society where women have equal rights and opportunities, the Muslim majority world can contribute to building more inclusive and prosperous nations.

Commitment to Religious Pluralism: Fostering Social Cohesion

Progressive Islam recognizes the value of religious pluralism and emphasizes the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. It acknowledges that religious diversity is a strength and advocates for the protection of religious minorities' rights. By promoting religious tolerance and understanding, progressive Islam can foster social cohesion and peaceful coexistence within Muslim-majority nations.

In the context of the 2030 SDGs, [social cohesion](#) is crucial for sustainable development. By embracing religious pluralism, Muslim-majority nations can create inclusive societies where individuals of different faiths can contribute to national development efforts. This inclusivity enhances social stability, reduces conflicts, and promotes cooperation, leading to more effective implementation of the SDGs.

Encouragement of Creative and Innovative Thought: Nurturing Entrepreneurship and Technological Advancement

Progressive Islam encourages critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and the pursuit of knowledge. It recognizes the importance of creativity and innovation in addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. By fostering an environment that nurtures entrepreneurship and technological advancement, Muslim-majority nations can harness the potential of their populations to drive sustainable development.

Innovation and technological advancement [are integral](#) to the achievement of the 2030 SDGs. Progressive Islamic principles can inspire investments in research and development, the promotion of STEM education, and the creation of supportive ecosystems for startups and entrepreneurs. By embracing a culture of innovation,

Muslim-majority nations can leapfrog into sustainable technologies and solutions, contributing to the global efforts of sustainable development.

Conclusion

Progressive Islam offers a comprehensive framework that aligns with the principles and objectives of sustainable development. By integrating progressive Islamic teachings into policy frameworks, Muslim-majority nations can effectively address the challenges outlined by the 2030 SDGs. From ecological sustainability to human rights, institutional democracy, poverty eradication, gender justice, religious pluralism, and innovation, progressive Islam provides a roadmap for positive change.

To unlock the full potential of progressive Islam, it is crucial for Muslim-majority nations to promote dialogue, engage with religious scholars, and invest in education and awareness programs. By embracing the principles of progressive Islam, Muslim-majority nations can pave the way for sustainable development, creating inclusive societies that prioritize the well-being of their citizens, protect the environment, and contribute to global efforts towards a more prosperous and equitable world.

Embracing Islam as a Dynamic Civilizational Project: The Progressive Muslim Worldview

Adis Duderija

Within the diverse spectrum of Islamic thought, the progressive Muslim worldview offers a unique understanding of Islam as a dynamic and evolving civilizational project. Unlike viewing Islam as a static religion or culture, progressive Muslims perceive it as a constantly progressing phenomenon that transcends reification. This essay aims to explore the delineating attributes of the progressive Muslim worldview, emphasizing its perspective on Islam as a global and adaptable faith that bridges cultural, national, and ethnic divides. Furthermore, it will highlight the inclusive and interactive nature of Islam with culture, acknowledging its rich civilizational heritage while recognizing its ongoing evolution. Ultimately, the core beliefs and practices of Islam remain deeply rooted in the historical legacy of the Qur'an.

Beyond Reification: A Dynamic Civilizational Project

The progressive Muslim worldview challenges the notion of Islam as a fixed and unchanging religion. Instead, it views Islam as a dynamic civilizational project in progress. By adopting this perspective, progressive Muslims reject the tendency to reify Islam, recognizing that religious traditions must evolve and adapt to the changing needs and circumstances of society.

This dynamic understanding allows for the interpretation and application of Islamic teachings in a way that addresses contemporary challenges while remaining rooted in the fundamental principles of the faith. It encourages critical thinking, intellectual engagement, and a continuous process of reinterpretation, ensuring that Islam remains relevant and responsive to the complexities of the modern world.

A Global Phenomenon across Cultural Divides

Progressive Muslims perceive Islam as a truly global phenomenon that transcends cultural, national, and ethnic boundaries. They emphasize the universality of Islam, asserting that its teachings are adaptable and adoptable by individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This inclusive outlook promotes understanding, tolerance, and unity among Muslims worldwide.

By recognizing Islam as what Ahmet [Karamustafa](#) refers to as supra-cultural construct, progressive Muslims move beyond ethnocentrism and appreciate the contributions of various cultures to the development and enrichment of Islamic traditions. They embrace the diversity of Islamic expressions, acknowledging that multiple interpretations and practices can coexist within the broader framework of the faith. This pluralistic approach fosters dialogue, cooperation, and solidarity among Muslims across the globe.

Inclusively Interactive: Islam and Culture

The progressive Muslim worldview acknowledges the interactive relationship between Islam and culture. Islam is not viewed as an isolated and independent entity but as a faith that engages with and is influenced by the cultural contexts in which it is practiced. This perspective recognizes that cultures provide a lens through which Islamic values and principles are understood and manifested.

Progressive Muslims advocate for critical engagement with cultural practices within the Islamic framework. They seek to distinguish between essential teachings of Islam and the cultural accretions that may have accumulated over time. This approach allows for the preservation of core Islamic principles while accommodating cultural diversity and evolving societal norms. By doing so, progressive Muslims aim to strike a balance between tradition and progress, ensuring the continuity of Islamic values while adapting to the changing needs of society.

A Treasure Trove of Civilizational Riches

The progressive Muslim worldview highlights Islam as a treasure trove of civilizational riches as argued by Ahmet [Karamustafa](#). Throughout history, Islam has contributed significantly to various fields, including science, art, literature, and philosophy. Progressive Muslims reclaim and celebrate the diverse heritage of Islamic civilization, countering the prevailing narrative that often associates Islam solely with conflict and extremism.

By underscoring the intellectual, artistic, and scientific achievements of Muslim scholars, progressive Muslims aim to inspire a sense of pride and appreciation for the contributions of Islamic traditions to human civilization. They promote cross-cultural dialogue, emphasizing the shared heritage and common values that Islam offers to all of humanity. This recognition of the wealth and diversity within Islamic civilization

fosters a positive and inclusive narrative about Islam in the contemporary world.

Linked to the Historical Legacy of the Qur'an

While embracing the dynamic and evolving nature of Islam, progressive Muslims firmly recognize the importance of the historical legacy of the Qur'an as the guide that provides the foundational principles for their faith. However, they also acknowledge the necessity of interpreting the Qur'an within its historical context and applying its teachings to contemporary circumstances. Progressive Muslims approach the Qur'an with critical inquiry, recognizing the multifaceted nature of its verses and the need for contextual understanding. They strive to extract the universal principles and ethical values from the Qur'an that can guide Muslims in addressing the challenges of the present time.

Conclusion

The progressive Muslim worldview presents a compelling understanding of Islam as a dynamic and inclusive civilizational project. By viewing Islam as a constantly evolving phenomenon beyond reification, progressive Muslims ensure its relevance and adaptability in a changing world. This perspective emphasizes the global nature of Islam, fostering unity and solidarity among Muslims across cultural, national, and ethnic boundaries. Furthermore, it acknowledges the interactive relationship between Islam and culture, allowing for the preservation of core principles while embracing cultural diversity. Progressive Muslims also celebrate the rich civilizational heritage of Islam, promoting dialogue and appreciation for its contributions to human civilization. Ultimately, while embracing progress and adaptation, progressive Muslims remain deeply connected to the historical legacy of the Qur'an, recognizing its foundational role in shaping Islamic beliefs and practices.

Through the lens of the progressive Muslim worldview, Islam emerges as

a faith that encourages critical thinking, social justice, and engagement with the world. It offers a pathway for Muslims to navigate the complexities of the modern era while staying rooted in their religious identity. By embracing this perspective, Muslims can contribute positively to the global community, fostering understanding, harmony, and progress. The progressive Muslim worldview serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Islam, allowing it to continue as a vibrant and dynamic faith that is inclusive of diverse cultures and responsive to the evolving needs of humanity.

Traditional and Critical-Progressive Qur'an-Sunna Interpretational Models in Comparative Perspective

Adis Duderija

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of groundbreaking scholarship in Qur'anic hermeneutics, including the works of Hasan Hanafi, Nasir Abu Zayd, Abdolkarim Soroush, Amina Wadud, and Khaled Abou El Fadl, to name but a few. One of the benefits of this growth in scholarship is that it highlights the complexities of the theories and methods in the field.

In my Ph.D. dissertation, completed in 2010 and [published](#) in 2011, I offer a comparative examination of these complexities and their implications in both traditional and modern Qur'anic scholarship, and delineate the epistemological and methodological tendencies that distinguish modern and traditional approaches with respect to the following seven key criteria.

The Nature of Language and the Nature of Revelation

Traditional approaches to interpreting the Qur'an are heavily philological, with interpretations largely restricted to observable linguistic features of the Qur'an text. According to this methodology, readers retrieve the text's meaning through analysis of the Arabic grammar, syntax, and morphology. At the same time, the Qur'anic text is considered as the verbatim Word of God essentially different from human language. Moreover, its meaning is completely independent of the psychological make-up of the Prophet Muhammad and his prophetic experience. Qur'anic language is thus considered to be operating outside of history and possessed of a fixed meaning that is, in principle, not dependent on human modes of perception and analysis.

Modern approaches recognize that the Qur'an's language is, at least for exegetical purposes, socio-culturally contingent, and its meaning necessarily operates within the framework of human perception and analysis. The nature of revelation, moreover, is closely intertwined with the mind and the phenomenological experience of the Prophet Muhammad. The interpretational implications are that the Qur'anic text has a historical dimension and that its meaning is conditioned by the cultural contexts in which it was revealed and is read.

The Location and Breadth of Meaning

When interpreting a text, one may posit that the meaning of the text is primarily determined either by the intent of the author, by the form of the text itself, or by the perception of the reader. Furthermore, one may hold that readers are either able to fully recover the meaning intended by the author, or to only approximate the intended meaning.

Traditional approaches largely consider that readers can perceive authorial intent and recover some objective meaning of the text. Since the meaning of the text is fixed, the role of the reader in determining

or influencing meaning is minimal. Belief in the objective existence of meaning in the mind of the author, which is readily accessible in a similarly objective fashion to the reader, contributes to the idea that there is only one correct interpretation of the text.

Modern hermeneutical approaches maintain that readers cannot recover authorial intent in a completely objective fashion. Rather, readers with their socio-cultural backgrounds, educations, moral inclinations, etc., actively participate in producing the text's meaning(s), which can only approximate authorial intent but can never completely and objectively capture it. While the text is fixed in its form, its meaning is not fixed by the author. Even if the text's meaning is considered static and monovalent, the significance of its meaning is contextually dependent and liable to change. Thus the text can sustain a large number of interpretations. However, to curb unreasonable or unpopular interpretations, some hermeneuticists have recourse to the concept of "communities of interpretation"—groups of readers who share similar cultural perspectives, values, and hermeneutical principles—to argue that the validity of interpretations is relative to, and limited by, the assumptions that characterize such communities.

The Relationship between Text and Context

Traditional philological hermeneutics tends to marginalize the historical context in which the Qur'an text was revealed. Although there is recognition of the historical character and development of the Qur'an when speaking of "occasions of revelation" (asbab al-nuzul) and "abrogation" (naskh), there are no clear hermeneutical models for fully integrating and utilizing these aspects in interpreting the language of the Qur'an. To the extent that historical context is considered, traditional philologists do not systematically distinguish between historical and ahistorical dimensions of meaning to the text. As a result, there is a strong tendency to universalize a historically particular meaning.

By contrast, modern hermeneuticists emphasize how the historical

context in which the Qur'an text was revealed significantly influenced the text's form and meaning, and how the historical frames of reference and cultural norms of the text's initial audience informed their understanding of the nature of the Qur'anic text and its meaning.

Textual Coherence

Traditional exegetes downplay the essentially oral and kerygmatic nature of the revelation and mainly take a word-by-word segmental and sequential analysis of the canonical text. Thus this approach fails to fully appreciate the Qur'an's thematic coherence.

Many modern exegetes recognize the interconnectedness of Qur'anic concepts and themes and undertake a holistic and corroborative-inductive approach to interpreting the Qur'an, based not only on insights stemming from the traditional scholarly principles of conceptual/textual chaining (*munāsaba*) and corroborative induction (*istiqrā'*), but also on modern linguistics approaches to textual coherence, sequentiality, and progression. Understanding a Qur'anic concept requires analyzing all relevant passages throughout the text and synthesizing them within a larger thematic framework. The task of interpretation is to discover a "comprehensive constant."

The Role of Reason in Ethico-Legal Interpretations of the Qur'an

Traditional exegetes heavily restrict the role of reason to its analogical form, so that all ethico-legal interpretations must be linked to textual evidence. If there is no directly pertinent text, then every effort is made to identify an indirectly pertinent text with a common underlying principle and to interpret it in light of its significance to the new case. The underlying assumptions are that ethico-legal knowledge must always derive from revelation and that humans cannot know what is ethically or legally right by independent reason.

Modern exegetes, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of reason in interpreting the Qur'an and consider the Qur'an itself to be constitutive of reason. Inasmuch as human reason can independently make ethical judgments, the function of revelation is to remind people of their ethical obligations. Contrary to the traditional legalistic approach, they consider that the Qur'an is primarily ethico-religious in its concern, and that its legal aspects are peripheral to its broader ethical vision and subject to change as societal conditions change. Thus legal interpretations of the Qur'an ought to evolve with evolving ethical values by means of reason—keeping in mind, however, that Islamic ethics is firmly anchored in a Qur'anic religious cosmology.

Interpreting Universal Principles of the Qur'an

All of the aforementioned aspects of traditional hermeneutics make for a rather limited understanding of the Qur'an when it comes to its embodiment of basic ethical values, such as justice and equality, and its underlying objectives, such as facilitating public welfare and promoting the common good. On the other hand, all of the aspects of modern hermeneutics contribute to a broader interpretational concern to realize such principle values and objectives.

The Conception of the Prophetic Sunna

It is widely held in Islamic tradition that the prophetic sunnah enjoys exegetical supremacy over independent rational methods, and moreover that this sunnah is entirely and solely embodied in sound Hadith texts. Thus for traditional exegetes, recourse to the sunnah as an exegetical device is necessarily constitutive of, and constrained by, the textual corpus of Hadith. In contrast, modern exegetes tend to hold a more meta-textual conception of the prophetic sunnah, more in line with how sunnah was understood in the early Islamic era, which does not conflate the concept of sunnah with the concept of Hadith as text. Thus in addition to the traditional Hadith sciences, modern exegetes employ

several additional methodological mechanisms to distinguish the prophetic sunnah, the details of which cannot be fully addressed here.

Hopefully this outline helps to demonstrate the complexity of Qur’anic hermeneutics and the importance for those who are taking part in discussions on Islamic topics to be aware of the critical implications of distinct hermeneutical approaches for determining what is a normative “Qur’anic position” on any particular legal, political, or ethical issue.

The Qur'an and the Nature of Revelation in Critical- Progressive Islam

Adis Duderija

The Qur'an, the central religious text of Islam, is revered by Muslims worldwide. However, the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an can vary significantly among different Muslim communities. One such community is that of progressive Muslims, who approach the Qur'an and the concept of revelation from a unique perspective that challenges traditional interpretations and opens up new avenues for understanding the divine.

The Socio-Cultural Production of the Qur'an

Progressive Islam, as outlined in my two monographs on the theory of progressive Islam (see chapters above) views the Qur'an not as a static, unchanging text, but as a socio-culturally produced discourse. This perspective acknowledges the influence of the socio-cultural environment in which the Qur'an was revealed on the text itself. The Qur'an, in this view, is not separate from the world it emerged from,

but is intrinsically linked to it. This organic and symbiotic relationship between the Qur'an and its original environment is a key aspect of progressive Muslim thought.

This perspective is a departure from traditional Islamic thought, which often views the Qur'an as a purely divine text that is independent of its socio-cultural context. By contrast, progressive Islam recognizes that the Qur'an, like any text, is shaped by the circumstances of its creation. This includes the historical, political, and cultural context in which it was revealed, as well as the personal experiences and perspectives of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. This recognition of the Qur'an as a socio-culturally produced discourse allows for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of the text.

Revelation Beyond Text

In addition to this socio-cultural understanding of the Qur'an, progressive Islam also adopts a unique approach to the concept of revelation. Unlike traditional Islamic thought, which views revelation as primarily text-dependent, progressive Islam emphasizes the role of human religious experience and the natural world as sources of divine signs, or *ayaat*. This perspective is informed by a philosophy of religion rooted in [process-relational](#) metaphysics, which posits that reality is composed of interrelated processes and events rather than static entities.

This approach to revelation acknowledges the centrality of human religious experience, including mystical and perennialist experiences, as a universal phenomenon across diverse cultures and civilizations. It also recognizes the natural world and human rational faculty as sources of divine signs. These signs are confirmed in the Qur'an, establishing a qualitative difference between progressive Islam's approach to revelation and that of Islamic orthodoxy.

This perspective on revelation also challenges the traditional Islamic view that the Qur'an is the sole source of divine knowledge. Instead,

it posits that divine knowledge can be found in a variety of sources, including human experience and the natural world. This opens up new possibilities for understanding the divine and challenges the exclusivity often associated with religious texts.

A Different Metaphysical Foundation

The metaphysical underpinnings of progressive Islam also differ significantly from those of Islamic orthodoxy. While orthodox Islam views the Qur'an as a purely divine text, progressive Islam posits the metaphysical impossibility of such a text. Instead, it views the Qur'an as a product of both divine inspiration and human agency, reflecting the evolving and contingent nature of human religious experience.

This perspective is informed by process-relational metaphysics and [theology](#), which reject the concept of God as conceptualized in classical theism, including the Islamic version of it. Instead, God is seen as a dynamic, relational entity, constantly interacting with the world and its processes.

This metaphysical perspective has significant implications for how the Qur'an is interpreted. It challenges the traditional view of the Qur'an as a fixed, unchanging text and instead views it as a dynamic, evolving document that reflects the ongoing interaction between the divine and the human.

Interpreting the Qur'an

Given these metaphysical parameters, progressive Islam advocates for a particular approach to interpreting the Qur'an. This approach takes into account the [intertextuality](#) of the Qur'an and the historical context in which it originated. It seeks to understand the Qur'an not as an isolated text, but as part of a larger discourse, influenced by and influencing the world around it.

This approach to interpretation is not limited to the Qur'an but extends to all religious texts. It recognizes that all texts are products of their time and place and that their meanings can change and evolve over time. This recognition allows for a more dynamic and flexible approach to religious interpretation, one that is open to new insights and understandings.

Conclusion

To understand the nature of progressive Muslim thought it is essential to understand how it approaches the Qur'an and the nature of revelation itself. I emphasised the idea that progressive Islam considers the Qur'an as a socio-culturally produced and literary discourse or set of discourses. Furthermore, according to progressive Muslim thought there is an organic and symbiotic link between the religious environment out of which the Qur'an emerged and the nature of the Qur'an itself. Moreover, from the perspective of philosophy of religion that is embraced by progressive Muslim thought, namely one informed by process-relational metaphysics, the concept of "Revelation" (i.e. what constitutes sources of Divine signs) is not text-dependent but emphasises the validity of the concept of "Revelation" by pointing to the idea of:

1. Centrality of human religious experience, including the mystical and perennialist, as a universal phenomenon historically and across diverse cultures and civilisations
2. The natural world and human rational faculty as sources of Divine signs. These Divine signs are repeatedly confirmed in the Qur'an and are termed ayaat. In this respect, there is a qualitative difference here between progressive Islam's approach to Revelation (and the nature Qur'an) and Islamic orthodoxy. For Islamic orthodoxy it is the plain, ahistorical and non-philosophical reading of Qur'an itself (and the associated orthodox canonical literature and commentary) that sets the parameters of what constitutes Divine signs (including the Qur'an itself) whereas in progressive Muslim thought, the concept of "Revelation" is a by-product of a particular

approach to philosophy of religion understood from the perspective of process-relational theology through which Qur'anic theological ideas are conceptualised and interpreted. This is, in part, because in progressive Muslim thought the understanding of the origins and nature of the Qur'an are metaphysically different from that of the Islamic orthodoxy which brings me to another point. Namely, in concert with process-relational metaphysics/ theology and in contrast with orthodox Islamic dogma, progressive Islam's approach to scripture as source of Divine signs is premised on the metaphysical impossibility of a purely Divine text and metaphysical impossibility of the non-contingent and non-evolving nature of human religious experience itself including the "Prophetic". Hence, according to this approach the Qur'an ought to be interpreted:

1. In the light of the metaphysical parameters of process-relational metaphysics in general and process-relation theology that rejects the concept of God as conceptualised in [classical theism](#) (including the Islamic version of it).
2. In the light of its intertextuality and the historical context in which the Qur'an originated.

In understanding the Qur'an, progressive Islam proposes a specific approach that considers the intertextuality of the Qur'an and the historical context in which it emerged. This approach seeks to understand the Qur'an not as an isolated text, but as part of a broader discourse that interacts with the world around it.

How Critical-Progressive Islam Approaches the Idea of Sunna

Adis Duderija

The concept of sunna, as one of the two normative fountainheads of the Islamic tradition, is of fundamental importance for understanding nearly all branches of Islamic knowledge, particularly Islamic jurisprudence and ethics. Moreover, the concept of sunna, like other major concepts in the Islamic intellectual tradition, has been conceptualised and interpreted differently by different schools of thought and/or political actors. It should not be surprising that the meaning and nature of ‘sunna’ has been expressed differently throughout Muslim history. Within that context, certain groups or actors were able to monopolise the meaning of sunna to become — or, indeed, simply regard themselves as — its most faithful, if not only legitimate, proponents. The main aim of this paper is to discuss how the concept of sunna, its sources, nature, and scope are understood in contemporary progressive Muslim thought, and what some of the implications of such an understanding are in relation to Islamic ethics and religious practice.

However, before this is attempted, a brief overview of progressive Muslim thought is in order. Progressive Islam has emerged over the last two decades as a creative and significant Islamic intellectual movement with a transnational following. Its most recent intellectual forerunners

are twentieth-century modernist Muslim scholars, such as A. al-Fasi (d.1974), T. Ibn 'Ashur (d.1973), A. Shariati (d.1977), and F. Rahman (d.1988). In its broadest terms, progressive Muslim thought is a contemporary Islamic orientation premised on a particular approach to the Islamic interpretive tradition in the context of late modernity and whose delineating features are based on the following commitments:

- a. creative, critical, and innovative thought based on epistemological openness and methodological rigidity;
- b. Islamic liberation theology;
- c. social and gender justice;
- d. human rights-based approach to the Islamic tradition;
- e. rationalist and contextualist approaches to Islamic theology and ethics;
- f. affirmation of religious pluralism;
- g. process-relational Islamic theology.

These delineating features have a direct bearing on how Muslim progressives approach the concept of sunna. The architects of progressive Muslim thought represent but one approach to the contemporary discussion of sunna and hadith/hadith reform. In contemporary Islamic discourse, there are five distinct approaches to these topics:

- a. mainstream Sunnism, as found in the works of scholars like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Ramadan al-Buti (d.2015), Mehmet Görmez, and Israr Ahmad Kahn (d.2010);
- b. non-mainstream Sunnism/Salafism/neo-ahl al-hadith, as exemplified by scholars like Nasir al-Albani (d.1999) and al-Uthaymin (d.2001);
- c. the sunna-hadith conceptual distinction, as discussed in the works of F. Rahman (d.1988), Amin Islahi (d.1977), and Javed Ghamidi;
- d. the Qur'an-only approach associated with Ghulam Perwez

(d.1985) and Ahmed Subhy Mansour;

- e. progressive Islam, as associated with Faqihuddin Abdolqodir, Sadiyya Shaikh, and Adis Duderija.

I will now focus on how progressive Muslim thought approaches the concept of sunna with specific reference to its status as a binding source of Islamic ethics for Muslims worldwide.

The Concept of Sunna in the Islamic Interpretive Tradition: A Brief Overview

During the first three centuries of the Islamic calendar (AH), the concept of sunna seems to have been primarily understood as the general, unsystematically defined ethical-behavioural practice of the early Muslim community formulated, preserved, and transmitted either orally and/or through the practices of the Prophet's Companions. During this period sunna was based on recognised Islamic religious norms and accepted standards of conduct derived from the religious and ethical principles introduced by the Prophet.

However, for a variety of different reasons, before the end of the first century AH, Muslims began to systematically document events surrounding Prophet Muhammad's life in the form of short written reports termed hadith or akhbar. Over the next two or three centuries, this phenomenon, known as *Talab ul-'ilm*, gave rise to the formulation and consolidation of what become known as the hadith sciences (*ulum ul-hadith*), which included branches of knowledge pertaining to the collection, assessment, and evaluation of hadith based on certain methodological principles and mechanisms designed to ensure their authenticity. This was done with a view to using those hadith deemed authentic, in addition to the Qur'an, as important sources of Islamic jurisprudence, ethics, and (to a lesser extent) theology.

With the development and maturation of mainstream Islamic

legal theory (usul ul-fiqh) at the end of the fifth century AH, the concept of sunna was for interpretational purposes largely conflated with “authentic” (sahih) hadith, as defined by hadith specialists (muhaddithun), and recognised as a form of unrecited revelation. Given its voluminous nature and the Qur’an’s limited capacity to be used as a comprehensive source of Islamic law and ethics, this hadith-dependent concept of sunna became a very significant, if not the most significant, source of Islamic norms, values, law, practice, and (to a lesser extent) belief. Moreover, seen from the perspective of mainstream Islamic legal theory, this concept of sunna was not only deemed able to confirm various Qur’anic injunctions, but also specify, restrict, supplement, and even override them.

This mainstream classical Islamic legal approach to sunna, however, significantly departed from the nature and scope of that concept as it had been understood during the formative period of Islamic thought. For example, in terms of sources, during the formative period sunna was not restricted to the persona of Muhammad, but included other significant religious authorities, such as the first four caliphs. This concept of sunna found expression as: well-established general normative practice (‘amal) perpetuated in actu (independent of textualist or oral transmission, being embodied); a consensus among Muslims (fi ma jama‘tum ‘alayhi wa-sanantum); the example of pious and virtuous people (sunnat ahl al-khayr); or ‘sunna accepted by all’ (al-sunna al-mujma’ alayh), as found in the writing of some Mu’tazila and the preserved and well-known sunna (al-sunna al-mahfuza al-ma’rufa) of early Hanafism, to name but a few.

Moreover, in terms of the nature of sunna in formative Islam, evidence suggests it pertained to a general practice that was simply considered righteous (khayr), or else to a concept that was dynamic and ethical-behavioural in nature, rather than textually fixed and hadith-dependent. Importantly, the concept of sunna during the formative period was constitutive of reason and/or reason-based opinion (ra’y), being understood to operate within a largely rationalist theological and ethical framework. Such an approach to sunna contrasts significantly with

mainstream classical Islamic theology, legal theory, and ethics based on non-rationalist theology and ethics.

In summary, the classical concept of sunna operated within the parameters of classical Islam's *usul ul-fiqh* tradition in terms of sources, nature, and scope. This was qualitatively different, however, from how that concept was understood and conceptualised during the formative period of Islamic thought.

The Concept of Sunna in Progressive Muslim Thought: An Overview

In many ways, regarding the concept of sunna, progressive Muslim scholarship continues the approach of formative Islamic thought, including the conceptual distinction between sunna and 'authentic hadith'. In other words, progressive Muslim scholarship considers sunna to be a dynamic, ethical-behavioural set of norms, practices, and values that are not just linked directly to the persona of the Prophet Muhammad, but also to other individuals and, indeed, groups.

To better understand how progressive Muslim thought approaches the concept of sunna, we need to first distinguish between different elements of the latter. I have argued elsewhere that sunna reflecting the nature of the Qur'an can be categorised into ethical-moral (*sunna akhlaqiyya*), legal (*sunna fiqhiyya*), and ritual/praxis (*sunna 'ibadiyya*) categories. Interpretationally, these exist in an organic relationship with the Qur'an itself, as well as the methodologies underpinning not only *ulum ul-hadith* but also *usul ul-fiqh* and 'ilm ul-kalam (*manhaj*). As mentioned above, progressive Muslim *manhaj* is based on contextualist and rationalist approaches to Islamic theology and ethics. All elements of sunna in progressive Islam have to function within this broader framework. Moreover, in progressive Muslim

thought, all dimensions of sunna are either ethical-behavioural in

nature or can be perpetuated in actu and are, therefore, embodied and independent of textualist sources. As such, they do not depend on a textualist expression to be known, carried out, or transmitted. Furthermore, in progressive Muslim thought, no element of sunna pertains to collective Islamic belief ('aqida) or individual belief (shurut al- iman); such relate to the realm of the Unseen (ghaybiyat) and cannot therefore be 'embodied'. As such, any hadith, authentic or not, that introduces extra- Qur'anic beliefs (such as the Second Coming of Jesus/Dajjal, punishment of the grave, etc.) are to be rejected and not considered part of sunna. Moreover, the idea that sunna is an unrecited form of revelation (wahy ghayr matlu) as per classical Islamic interpretive traditions is not accepted for the same reason.

As alluded to above, the ethical, moral, and legal elements of sunna as understood by progressive Islam are based not only on a rationalist but also a contextualist approach. This recognises a strong element of custom ('urf) in the ethico-religious and legal injunctions present in both the Qur'an and hadith. This recognition of the 'urfi nature of Qur'anic ethical-religious injunctions goes well beyond the confines of classical usul ul-fiqh conceptions of 'urf (customs) which, from the perspective of a progressive Muslim manhaj, conflates 'urfi norms, values, and practices with universalist elements of the Qur'an. This aspect of classical Islam's approach to the Qur'an-sunna-'urf relationship is perceptively noted by [Kadivar](#), who argues that what he calls "historical Islam" mixes the sacred and timeless message of the divine revelation with the "custom at the time of its arrival" ('urf-i 'asr-i nuzul). All the problems that have entered Islam in the modern age relate to this 'customary part' (bakhsh-i 'urfi) of traditional Islam.

Importantly, according to progressive Muslim thought, the 'urf-based injunctions within the Qur'an and hadith that were subsequently included as non-negotiable elements of classical Islamic law were considered reasonable and just by their contemporaries but should not be considered as forever binding.

However, this is not to imply that these ‘urf-based legal injunctions and laws should continue to be considered reasonable and just now. According to Kadivar, Islam acknowledged and accepted the pre-Islamic customs as they were, either directly or with some modifications, to the extent that these customs could be seen as supplementary guidelines to the prevailing practices of the time that were not strictly based on religious scripture, blind imitation, or considered sacred, as they were used and recognized by rational individuals. These commandments were established to promote justice and serve the worldly interests of human communities.

In progressive Islam when it comes to its criterion of justice, the Qur’an recognises the ‘urf existent at the time of its revelation as its primary criterion – but that these concepts of justice and their understanding are temporal and to some extent local. So, according to progressive Muslim thought, all of the ethical-legal injunctions found in the Qur’an and sunna/hadith, including classical Muslim family law and corporal punishments (hudud), are premised on customary considerations (‘urf) and are not, therefore, meant to be applied literally, regardless of context. They are rather subject to change and evolution within the broader manhaj parameters associated with progressive Muslim thought, as explained above. As a corollary, progressive Muslim thought asserts that neither the Qur’an nor the sunna provide a systematic, ahistorical, or comprehensive system of universal ethics that can be simply retrieved or discovered. Although some principles of universalist ethics/morality can be deduced or derived from the Qur’an’s (and therefore sunna’s) ‘comprehensive contextualization’, Islamic law/ethics is essentially rationalist and purposive in nature.

Moreover, when dealing with canonical hadith as a source of Islamic ethics and law, progressive Muslim scholars have used a number of mechanisms inclusive of, but also going beyond, those associated with classical Islamic hadith science when discerning what can legitimately constitute sunna. In this respect, we can point to the work of [Barazangi](#) who makes a distinction between the process of authenticating hadith, as

done by classical muhaddithun, and an independent process of validating hadith in order to arrive at what she calls a new non-patriarchal concept of sunna. We can also identify the approach of [Kodir](#), who uses the contextualisation approach associated with the classical hadith science of ‘ilm asbab ul-wurud while also applying the concept of maqasid al-shari’a in order to arrive at a normative sunna.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have outlined the nature and scope of sunna in progressive Muslim thought. I argued that, unlike the hadith-based concept of sunna derived from classical Islam, sunna in progressive Islam has strong affinities with how that concept was understood during the formative period of Islamic thought. In this respect, I argued that the concept of sunna in progressive Islam operates within a broad contextualist and rationalist approach to Islamic theology and ethics, transforming it into a general ethical-behavioural embodied concept that is not viewed as a source of Islamic belief nor as a form of unrecited revelation - although, for interpretational purposes, it exists in an organic and symbiotic relationship with the Qur’an. I also briefly alluded to the approach progressive Muslim scholars use when dealing with the hadith in order to arrive at binding sunna. Finally, I wish to identify several concrete implications this approach has for doing away with many norms, values, and practices associated with sunna as understood in classical Islam, such as those pertaining to Muslim family law and criminal law. In this respect, a progressive Muslim approach to binding sunna enables the Islamic interpretive tradition to shed ethically and epistemologically outdated norms, values, and practices that have often been defended on the basis of a concept of sunna operating within the interpretational confines of classical Islamic theology and legal theory. The theological, ethical, legal, and socio-cultural implications of this approach to sunna are wide reaching, especially in Muslim majority settings. With that in mind, concrete implications in the form of policy recommendations are made:

- i. Ethical-religious practices such as female genital cutting, so-called honour killings, and veiling that have some textualist support in the form of hadith, and have been either justified under the umbrella of sunna or considered acceptable (or at least tolerable) elements of Islamic law/ ethics are, from the perspective of progressive Muslim hermeneutics, expressions of the logic of patriarchal honour and not equitable with sunna. As such, these practices are to be abolished immediately.
- ii. The practice of stoning to death for adultery is to be rejected as part of normative sunna, since this punishment is based purely on evidence from the hadith.
- iii. All criminal punishments found in Islamic criminal law (hudud), including punishment for apostacy, ought to be considered outdated on the premise that they are based on ‘urfi considerations that the Qur’an and normative sunna did not introduce or view as normative.
- iv. Hadith-based beliefs about the signs of Judgement Day and related apocalyptic literature that are often exploited by extremists (most recently by the so-called Islamic State) in order to legitimate their ideology are also to be rejected.

Muslim legislators, judges, politicians, and religious leaders ought to adopt the approach to sunna outlined by progressive Muslim thought. This will provide them with authentic, historically informed, faith-based solutions capable of updating the Islamic interpretive tradition, both ethically and epistemologically, bringing it on par with contemporary global and human rights inspired ethical, legal, and cultural sensibilities.